

“Scandinavians are terribly Scandinavian”: Nordahl Grieg’s Friendship with Graham Greene

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Introduction

“A friendship can be among the most important events in a life, and a way of escape, just as much as writing or travel, from the everyday routine, the sense of failure, the fear of the future” Graham Greene claims in his second volume of autobiography, *Ways of Escape*.¹ One such escape was Greene’s friendship with the Norwegian writer Nordahl Grieg. Although they met only three times before Grieg’s untimely death in 1943, he seems to have made a lasting impression on Greene, who would often mention him in letters and interviews throughout his life. When *Ways of Escape* was published in 1980, Greene dedicated an entire chapter to his Norwegian friend, something that prompted readers in both England and Norway to write to Greene and reminisce about a man they remembered with fondness.

Nordahl Grieg

The youngest of four children, Grieg was born in Bergen in 1902 into a literary household. Grieg’s father Peter had studied at Oxford and worked as a highly respected English teacher in Bergen. He would often read aloud to

his children or recite Shakespeare to pass the time during long walks. Young Nordahl directed puppet theatre and wrote plays, poetry, and journalistic articles—even his childhood letters to his older brother Harald had a distinct literary flavor. (Harald Grieg went on to become the director of Gyldendal, one of Norway’s largest publishing houses.) In a city where the population was of mostly Hanseatic origin, the Griegs were proud to have British ancestors; they got their surname from Alexander Grieg, who came to Bergen from Scotland in 1777 and later earned a living exporting lobsters to his old homeland.

As soon as he was old enough to travel on his own, Nordahl Grieg sought inspiration for his writing outside Norway, and he continued to do so all throughout his life; he went to sea at age eighteen, studied in Oxford in the early 1920s, spent prolonged periods of time in northern Norway writing romantic odes to the rough, wintry landscape, and traveled to China as a journalist during the civil war in 1927. Ten years later he reported on another civil war that resulted in the book *Spanish Summer*. In the early 1930s he went to Moscow where he became a convinced Stalinist, an ideological shift that greatly influenced his writing in the last decade of his life.

However, the only country Grieg kept returning to with some regularity was Britain, despite how his first impression of the island in the west was far from favorable. When he sailed out on the cargo ship *Henrik Ibsen* in 1920, the first stop on the way was Newcastle. Grieg wrote home to his family: “I have made a note of not having seen a single normal-looking person in England. ...

¹ Graham Greene, *Ways of Escape* (London: Vintage, 2002), 39.

Here is ugly as a nightmare, coal smoke and small, terrible houses, not a pretty line or color in the entire city. ... The air is raw, cold and clammy.”² If anything, young Grieg’s crass descriptions of working-class Newcastle demonstrate how there would still be many years before he discovered his political project and became a communist.

Instead, his lifelong bond with Britain was formed during his stay at Wadham College three years later. Grieg attended Oxford University from 1923-1924 as the fourth ever recipient of the Norwegian Oxford Scholarship. His letters home from this period, written from his elegant rooms just a stone’s throw away from the Bodleian Library, reveal a far more favorable impression of the country he now lovingly termed “Merlin’s isle.”³ He liked to impress his father by writing him letters in English, which Peter Grieg then corrected and returned to his son. Grieg wrote of how he loved “the spirit” of Oxford and described his time there as the best of his life.⁴

Grieg has in fact made a lasting impression on Wadham College; his 1925 poem “In Wadham Chapel” was made a hymn in 2010 and has been sung in the chapel on Remembrance Sunday ever since. During the 2018 Evensong, held on the centenary of the First World War, Johan Nordahl Brun Grieg’s name was read out as one of the university’s lost “Wadhamites.”⁵

After his stay at Oxford, Grieg would return to England for two prolonged periods of time: in the early 1930s to

work on his book about English poets, and again in 1940 when Norway was occupied by Nazi Germany. It was in England that he married his wife Gerd Egede-Nissen, and England also became his last permanent home, as it was from an airstrip in the little village of Binbrook that he, on 2 December 1943, boarded the Avro Lancaster that was eventually shot down over Berlin.

First meeting: 1932

Despite his premature death, Grieg was well connected within the literary world, and his time spent in England meant that he became intimate with writers on the British literary scene: he met a young Malcolm Lowry in 1931, corresponded in 1936 with Aldous Huxley, and dined with T. S. Eliot in London in the early 1940s. However Graham Greene was the only English writer with whom Grieg remained in touch—from their first meeting in 1932 until Grieg’s death in 1943.

When they first met in September 1932, both men were going through times of unrest. Greene was at the very onset of his literary career. After the success of *The Man Within* in 1929 he had optimistically quit his position as sub-editor of *The Times*. However, when his second novel *The Name of Action* turned out a commercial and critical failure, Greene and his wife Vivien were forced to rent out their comfortable home in West Londo and move to the country house “Little Orchard” in Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire.⁶ When his third novel *Rumours at*

² Hoem, Edvard, *Til ungdommen: Nordahl Griegs liv* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1989), 38. My translations throughout.

³ Grieg, Harald, *Nordahl, min bror* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1963), 48. My translations throughout.

⁴ Hoem, 63-69.

⁵ I was present at that year’s Evensong. Grieg was also mentioned by the chaplain during her address.

⁶ Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene Volume One 1904-1939* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), 388.

Nightfall was published in 1931 to poor reviews, Greene began doubting his abilities as a writer: "Very depressed about my work and the future," he wrote in his diary on 15 June 1932.⁷ By the time Grieg went to visit him in September, Greene had just handed over the manuscript for *Stamboul Train* to his publisher, and his diary entries consisted exclusively of variations of "Still nothing from Heinemann."⁸

That summer, Grieg had returned to Oxford for the first time since his university days to work on his book about the English poets John Keats, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Charles Sorley, Wilfred Owen, and Rupert Brooke. Grieg struggled with his work; in a letter to his best friend Nils Lie he claimed that "this book about the English is becoming the biggest nonsense you can imagine."⁹ He also complained to his brother Harald about the small typeface in the books he was studying: "Even with glasses the eyes hurt like the devil. God knows if [the book] will not end up 'The Young Dead by one of them!'"¹⁰ His finances were reduced to nothing, he was getting nowhere with his work, and it was in this state of dejection that he, in September 1932, first encountered Graham Greene.

On 12 September Greene wrote in his diary that Francis Ratcliffe, an old school friend from Berkhamsted, "drove over with a young Norwegian poet, Nordahl Grieg."¹¹ Their unexpected

meeting seems to have been a welcome change for both men, and Greene later wrote in *Ways of Escape* that "to me he certainly brought a measure of hope ... carrying it like a glass of akvavit down the muddy lane in Chipping Campden."¹²

In his diary Greene detailed his first encounter with Grieg, describing the Norwegian writer as "charming with his accent, his courtliness, his unexpectedness, which I could not follow closely enough."¹³ In *Ways of Escape* Greene later wrote that "I can't remember what we talked about that first time, when he came to 'look me up,' as he put it as sole explanation."¹⁴ From his diary however, it seems they discussed Norway; Grieg suggested Greene should take up a lectureship at the University of Oslo ("an idea too good to be obtainable" Greene noted) or at least give a talk at the Anglo-Norse Society.¹⁵ Grieg painted a charming picture of Oslo as somewhere "surrounded by forests," albeit filled with "stupid Norwegians drinking heavily, blindly admiring of England."¹⁶

Despite the abruptness of Grieg's visit, Greene later claimed he immediately felt "caught up" in Grieg's intimacy.¹⁷ This feeling seems to have been mutual; on 16 September Grieg related their meeting in a letter to Nils Lie, who was also Greene's Norwegian translator. In his letter Grieg described Greene as "an unusually nice and

⁷ Ibid., 420.

⁸ Ibid., 427.

⁹ Nordahl Grieg, *Et Varig Vennskap: 46 brev fra Nordahl Grieg til Nils Lie 1928-43*, ed. Brikt Jensen (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1981), 53. My translations throughout.

¹⁰ Harald Grieg, *Nordahl, min bror*, 174

¹¹ Graham Greene, Diary entry for 12 September 1932, Box 37, Folder 1, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, Texas, USA.

¹² Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 26

¹³ Greene, Diary entry, 12 Sept. 1932.

¹⁴ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 21

¹⁵ Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Nils Lie. 16 September 1932, Brevs. 509, Box 1, National Library of Norway, Oslo, Norway. My translations throughout.

¹⁶ Greene, Diary entry, 12 Sept. 1932.

¹⁷ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 21-25.

sympathetic fellow.”¹⁸ Struggling as he was with his book, Grieg admitted to Lie that he was often envious of other writers, but that *The Man Within* “seemed to me to be a sort of comfort, here was something that could not be reduced, something noble.”

It is likely that Grieg had been introduced to Greene’s writing through his brother Harald, who had recently published Greene’s debut novel *The Man Within* in a translation by Lie. Grieg mentioned Greene in a letter to Harald that autumn: “I am really happy that you are publishing him, for he is England’s best young writer at the moment.”¹⁹

Soon after his visit to Chipping Campden, Grieg relocated to Windrush Mill in Cotswold, hoping this would give him the peace needed to finish his book. He had never lived in a more tranquil place, and in letters home he described how the mill wheel’s beat was like “a heart in the night.”²⁰ Grieg wrote to Greene from Windrush Mill on 21 September. Still hoping that Greene could give a talk at the Anglo-Norse Society, Grieg wrote of how he had contacted them. (The talk came to nothing.)

In his letter Grieg also praised Greene for his international reputation: “I heard the other day that Byron had a feeling of a sort of posthumous fame when he heard he was read in Norway. You may safely have the same feeling.”²¹ He went on to describe Greene’s third

novel *Rumours at Nightfall*, which had not fared well with the critics, as “extremely interesting indeed” and complemented Greene on his “tremendous power of creating atmosphere.” However, he also admitted that the book’s Spanish setting, a country about which Greene knew nothing, was “less convincing” than the English setting of *The Man Within*.

About these perceived literary failures, Greene later wrote that he had made the mistake of taking inspiration “from [Joseph] Conrad at his worst,” thus coming up with overelaborate phrases such as “a clock relinquishing its load of hours.”²² Coincidentally, Grieg had finished translating Conrad’s novella *Typhoon* only a year before he traveled to England to work on his book, and so what Greene called “bastard Conradese tortuosity” may very well have been a topic of discussion during the two men’s initial meeting.²³

Grieg rounded off his letter by inviting Greene and Vivien to come and visit him at Windrush Mill: “How glad I should be to see you!”²⁴ Their letters were rarely properly dated, and Greene later wrote in *Ways of Escape* that it was “as though only the day of the month was important and the mere years could be left to look after themselves.”²⁵ One of Greene’s first letters to Grieg, in which he invited the Norwegian writer to tea, was simply dated “Tuesday.”²⁶

¹⁸ Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Nils Lie, 16 Sept. 1932.

¹⁹ Hoem, 159.

²⁰ Harald Grieg, *Nordahl, min bror*, 182.

²¹ Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Graham Greene, 21 Sept. 1932, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

²² Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 18.

²³ Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene Volume One*, 411.

²⁴ Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Greene, 21 Sept. 1932.

²⁵ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 21.

²⁶ Graham Greene, Letter to Nordahl Grieg, 1932, Brevs. 365b, National Library of Norway, Oslo, Norway.

It seems the two men did not find the time to meet again while Grieg was in England. Toward the end of 1932 the Norwegian writer finally finished his book and traveled home to celebrate Christmas in Bergen. He now wanted to go to Moscow and study Soviet theatre. This drastic change of scenery may have been prompted by Grieg's restlessness or his need to place his writing within a larger ideological framework. Patrick Salmon has argued that in 1933, Grieg merely "transferred his earlier romantic attachment to [Fridtjof] Nansen and Kipling to a new hero, Stalin."²⁷ Now, Grieg traveled east to find new meaning with which to charge his writing.

Correspondence in the 1930s

Greene counts it as unlikely that the two met again before Grieg's London exile during the war years, but what he called "the dreamlike atmosphere" of the Norwegian writer's friendship remained.²⁸ They corresponded throughout Grieg's stay in Russia and the Baltics in 1933-1934 and discussed everything from literature to failing love affairs. "It was a matter of messages" Greene later wrote in *Ways of Escape*, "warm and friendly and encouraging and critical, mostly in other people's letters. The only time I visited Norway he was away living in Leningrad, but the messages were there awaiting me. Nordahl Grieg, like a monarch, never lacked messengers."²⁹

On 18 July 1933 Greene sent Grieg a typed letter from Woodstock Road, Oxford: "I'm writing to you out of the air

into the blue, vainly hoping two things, that this letter may reach you, that you may be somewhere on the borders of Sweden next month."³⁰ Greene had decided to set his next novel, what ultimately became *England Made Me*, in Stockholm. The plan was to travel there in the late summer and then continue to Copenhagen.

Grieg got back to his English friend in a letter dated 5 August: "I was very glad to get your letter. I am—alas—on the other side of the Baltic, but still things can happen—let us be in touch with [one] another."³¹ Grieg was spending the summer of 1933 traveling around the Baltic Sea as he needed to renew his residential permit to the Soviet Union. He implored Greene to take a trip to Finland while in Scandinavia, which would bring him closer to the Baltics, and asked him why he did not go to Norway as well: "You have got many friends there now."

Greene arrived in Sweden with his brother Hugh on 18 August. He soon received another letter in which Grieg apologised for not being able to travel to Stockholm, and once again invited Greene to the Baltics in unidiomatic English: "But I assure you, that you before or later must come to Estonia, and please come now." He tempted Greene with the good weather, cheap currency, and the beautiful "native girls" whom they could buy with just a few

²⁷ Patrick Salmon, "Graham Greene's Scandinavian Lives," *Människan i historien och samtiden: festskrift till Alf W. Johansson*, ed. Ragnar Björk (Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2000), 235.

²⁸ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 21.

²⁹ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 21.

³⁰ Graham Greene, Letter to Nordahl Grieg, 18 July 1933, Brevs. 365b, National Library of Norway, Oslo, Norway.

³¹ Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Graham Greene, 5 Aug. 1933, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

pieces of chocolate.³² Greene was characteristically keen on the latter—he mentioned the girls twice in his response to Grieg, written from Hotel Esplanade in Stockholm on 24 August (“O damnation, I wish I could come, but I can’t.”³³) He was unable to afford tickets to Estonia for both himself and Hugh, and later wrote in *Ways of Escape*: “How I wished I had borrowed, begged or stolen the necessary funds and replied to at least one of those messages—‘I arrive on Saturday.’”³⁴

After a short stay in Stockholm, which Greene disliked due to what he called the “extreme formality” of the Swedish capital, the Greene brothers decided to travel to Oslo rather than Copenhagen.³⁵ In his travel essay “Two Capitals,” printed in *The Spectator* on 20 October 1933, Greene described Norway in poetic terms as “a little patch of careless culture at the edge of the sea and of the forest.”³⁶ Although he misspelled everything from the Norwegian currency to the name of Oslo’s main thoroughfare Karl Johans Gate, Greene nonetheless gave a charming portrayal of Oslo—the capital was presented as an alluring city where “nobody dreamed of going home till four.” Everyone appeared to be intoxicated, thus confirming Grieg’s initial warning about his countrymen’s drinking habits.

Grieg was also right about Greene having many friends in Norway at this point; in Oslo he met and befriended

Nils Lie and his wife Ingeborg. He got along very well with the Norwegian couple, and even dedicated his fifth novel *It’s a Battlefield* to them. (Grieg later wrote to Greene of how he had read the book with “great interest,” but that “the communist scene was very unconvincing.”³⁷)

Through Nils and Ingeborg Lie, Greene was also introduced to the Norwegian writer Sigurd Hoel, a colleague of Harald Grieg and one of the country’s most important authors in the interwar years. Greene kept in touch with the Norwegian couple after his return to England, and even planned to go to Lapland with Lie the coming year—however, Lie fell ill. (Grieg wrote to Lie in November 1933: “What a shame if you can’t go to Finnmark with Graham!”³⁸) Greene too was disappointed and wrote to Hugh on 11 March 1934: “Isn’t it maddening that Lapland is off? ... I’m just turning over in mind, but have said nothing to Vivien yet, about Moscow, not an Intourist trip but an individual one. If Nordahl Grieg is still there, it might be amusing.”³⁹ However Greene only got around to traveling to Moscow in the 1950s, many years after Grieg’s death.

The end of Nils and Ingeborg Lie’s marriage in 1934 also became a topic in Grieg and Greene’s correspondence. “As to Nils and Ingeborg it is just hell,” Grieg wrote from Moscow on 3 June; “I feel it, however, as an epoch of my life is finished; you will understand what I

³² Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Graham Greene, 20 August 1933, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA

³³ Graham Greene, Letter to Nordahl Grieg, 24 August 1933, Brevs. 365b, National Library of Norway, Oslo, Norway.

³⁴ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁶ Graham Greene, *Reflections* (London: Vintage Books, 2014), 31.

³⁷ Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Graham Greene, 3 June 1934, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

³⁸ Grieg, *Et varig vennskap*, 63.

³⁹ Graham Greene, *Graham Greene: A Life in Letters*, ed. Richard Greene (London: Little, Brown, 2007), 57.

mean, in fact you were a link between them; and if you had been in Oslo those days, only remembering [*sic*] them of their identity, it would probably never had [*sic*] happened.”⁴⁰ Apparently, Ingeborg had at one point broken down and written to Greene at five in the morning, detailing how she had arrived back from Moscow on Christmas Eve after having served as Grieg’s secretary for almost a year, “dirty, tired and full of longing,” only for Lie to tell her he had found someone else. Greene later described this episode in a letter to Hugh, adding dryly that “Scandinavians are terribly Scandinavian.”⁴¹

Veien Frem: 1936

Grieg returned to Norway from Moscow in late 1934, and there appears to have been little contact between the two writers until early 1936 when the converted Stalinist had just founded the political journal *Veien Frem*—(*The Way Onwards*.) On 20 February he wrote to Greene and announced just this: “I have just started a new, very left periodical to fight the rising wave of fascism and reaction in Norway.”⁴² As it happened, the first edition of *Veien Frem* had advertised future contributions from internationally renowned names, among them Graham Greene. “Are you angry?” Grieg asked coyly in his letter. “If you forgive me for old day’s sake, please then send me an article, something hairraisingly [*sic*] good. We—Nils is on the ‘staff’—need it very much. Please do it!”

It is not known what Greene thought of this boldness on Grieg’s part, but the second edition of *Veien Frem* did indeed

feature a contribution from the English writer, in either Grieg or Lie’s skilled translation. The short story “Brother,” which had been published in *The Basement Room and Other Stories* the year before, was indeed hair-raising in its depiction of a group of young communists who take refuge in a French bar and can, in some ways, be seen as a testament to Greene’s own communist sympathies. The proprietor in “Brother,” while initially hostile toward the harrowed Reds (one of whom is fresh out of a concentration camp), ends up sympathizing with his uninvited guests. Grieg must undoubtedly have been pleased with the story’s depiction of the brotherhood that comes to exist between the proprietor and the young communists, even when the latter don’t pay for their cognacs: “We are all comrades here. Share and share alike.”⁴³

Second meeting: 1940

In the years between 1936 and 1940 there appears once again to have been a lull in the two men’s correspondence. Greene was preoccupied as the literary editor of the short-lived magazine *Night and Day*, and when it folded in late 1937, he made a long-awaited journey to Mexico. Grieg was in Spain covering the civil war, and afterward threw himself headlong into the writing of a political novel, the main character of which was a young Englishman.

After the German occupation of Norway in April 1940, Grieg fled to London. In *Ways of Escape* Greene describes what is most likely their second meeting, which took place in the spring of 1940 at the Charing Cross

⁴⁰ Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Graham Greene, 3 June 1934.

⁴¹ Greene, *A Life in Letters*, 67.

⁴² Nordahl Grieg, Letter to Graham Greene, 20 Feb. 1936, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43,

Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

⁴³ Graham Greene, *Complete Short Stories*, (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 150.

Hotel. Grieg had just helped smuggle the gold from the Norwegian Bank out of his occupied home country. Immediately following his dangerous adventure, Grieg phoned Greene from the hotel and invited him over. Interviewed by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation in 1976, Greene sniggered when he described the following scene: “When he arrived with the gold I went and saw him at the Charing Cross Hotel, and the room was full of Norwegian exiled politicians and what not, they were sitting on the bed, he was lying on the bed, they were sitting on the floor, and Nordahl was telling his adventures.”⁴⁴ He elaborated further on this meeting in *Ways of Escape*: Grieg’s hotel room was filled with people “sitting about on the bed, the dressing-table, the floor, propped against the mantelpiece,” but the Norwegian writer still managed to make “a private corner between bolster and bedpost,” talking “of anything that seemed at the moment to matter—Marxism or the value of history or the Spanish war and Hemingway’s new book.”⁴⁵ It appears that Greene was still just as “caught up” in Grieg’s intimacy as he had been during their first meeting almost eight years before.

Last meeting: 1943

After this meeting, Grieg “disappeared again from my view,” as Greene later wrote.⁴⁶ Grieg’s partner Gerd joined him in London where they married in June 1940. Due to their support for the Norwegian resistance in London, Vidkun Quisling had sentenced them both to death if they ever returned

to Norway. Herr and Fru Grieg therefore continued to aid the resistance primarily from London, where they stayed at the South Kensington Hotel—a focal point of the Norwegian exiled milieu.

Meanwhile, Greene was away in West Africa working for the MI6 and writing his novel *The Ministry of Fear*.

The two men’s final meeting took place in the company of Nils Lie in the autumn of 1943. Greene wrote in *Ways of Escape*: “A few months before his death we met once more and spent a long evening with other Norwegian friends, an evening of which, because I never imagined it could be the last, I remember only talk and talk, then an air-raid siren and some gunfire, and talk again.”⁴⁷ There is another account of this evening, which gives us more insight into what was actually discussed. After Grieg’s death, Nils Lie described Grieg and Greene’s last meeting in a letter to Grieg’s sister Johanne: “I remember an evening with Graham Greene, who is a wonderful person and a sincere catholic.” Greene had apparently been pessimistic about the future. “Against this, Nordahl placed his indomitable belief in *humanity*” Lie wrote, “so contagious that he veritably converted the catholic.”⁴⁸

Grieg was made a captain during his London exile and was eventually allowed to join RAF bomber fighters as a correspondent on a raid over Berlin. Half past four in the afternoon on 2 December 1943, the Avro Lancaster carrying Grieg took off from Binbrook. He left behind a short note, written that same day and addressed to his wife: “My

⁴⁴ Fritz Nilsen, (presenter) *Mine møter med Nordahl Grieg*, NRK, 6 Nov. 1976, National Library of Norway, Oslo, Norway.
<https://www.nb.no/nbsok/nb/25150b538f4593e55ba525109051cf95.nbdigital?lang=no>

⁴⁵ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 24.

⁴⁶ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 25.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Gudmund Skjeldal, *Diktaren i bombeflyet* (Trondheim: Cappelen Damm, 2013), 369. My translations throughout.

own. If the worst should happen, then this is a loving kiss to you, my Gerd. You must live, and be good to everyone, that is what I would have wanted the most. Your own Nordahl.”⁴⁹

His squadron soon hit bad weather over Holland and Germany before German bomber planes retaliated. Bomber Command suffered one of its greatest losses that night, and three of the squadron's four war correspondents were reported missing—among them Nordahl Grieg.

“Nordahl Grieg was an omen or a myth, and he remained a myth,” Greene later wrote of his Norwegian friend. “Even his death was to prove legendary, so that none will be able to say with any certainty, ‘In this place he died.’”⁵⁰ Greene was right; Grieg's remains have yet to be located, but some believe he is buried at the British War Cemetery in Berlin.

After Grieg's death

On 8 May 1945, the day Norway was liberated by the Germans, Prime Minister Johan Nygaardsvold gave a celebratory speech from his London exile. He began by quoting from Nordahl Grieg's famous poem “17 May 1940”:

Bare to-day is the flagstaff
Where Eidsvoll's trees show
green,
But never as now have we
fathomed
What the blessings of freedom
mean.⁵¹

Grieg was hailed posthumously as a national hero and viewed as one of Norway's greatest poets during the war years, and yet his romantic yet clearly

politicized writing soon went out of vogue in Norway, and his reputation faded. However, Grieg was not forgotten. Greene first wrote about his Norwegian friend in the Anglo-Scandinavian journal *The Norseman* in March 1944. When this text was republished in 1980 in *Ways of Escape*, the ageing writer received numerous appreciative letters concerning his chapter on Grieg.

The first letter came in December 1980 from Tuva Hansteen, daughter-in-law of Viggo Hansteen, who had been one of Grieg's closest friends. Hansteen had worked as a lawyer for the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions and was executed by German soldiers in September 1941—the first openly political murder to be carried out in occupied Norway. When the news of Hansteen's death reached him, Grieg wrote in a letter to his sister that there “is something in me that is dead because there is something that can never be happy again.”⁵²

In her letter to Greene, Tuva Hansteen detailed her experience of reading about Grieg in *Ways of Escape*: “I opened it and my eyes fell upon the name of Nordahl Grieg! I read the chapter at once—standing there in the shop forgetting everything around me.”⁵³ About Grieg, Hansteen wrote: “I feel I know him through my husband. ... He remembers his father and Nordahl Grieg playing chess. After the death of my father-in-law Nordahl Grieg wrote a beautiful poem in memory of him.” She rounded off her letter by thanking Greene for what she called a “wonderful portrait of a dead friend—and let us

⁴⁹ Skjeldal, 386.

⁵⁰ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 20–21.

⁵¹ I use G. M. Gathorne Hardy's translation, found in *War Poems of Nordahl Grieg* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1944), 22.

⁵² Skjeldal, 335.

⁵³ Tuva Hansteen, Letter to Graham Greene, 9 Dec. 1980, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

hope that his omen will be able to defeat the bad omens of Europe and of the world to day [*sic*].

A year later, in April 1982, the Norwegian daily newspaper *Aftenposten* printed an interview with Greene entitled “Our man in Antibes,” in which the English writer enquired after his old friend Nils Lie: “Tell me, is Nils Lie still alive? I met him that one time I was in Oslo, in the 30s. The last I heard of him was from Nordahl Grieg.”⁵⁴ At this point, Grieg had been dead for almost forty years.

The interviewer could give no answer, but soon after Greene received a letter from Jens Folkman, a friend of Nils and Ingeborg’s son Mikael. Folkman kindly informed Greene that Lie had died four years previously in 1978. He expanded on Lie’s “very strong position as a reader and translator in the publishing house of Gyldendal” and included copies of Grieg’s war poems.⁵⁵ An avid reader of Greene’s work, Folkman also thanked the English writer for “all the pleasures you have bestowed upon me during the years.” Greene’s response on 10 May was short but appreciative: “How very kind indeed of you to send me photographs of Nils Lie and the material on my friend Nordahl Grieg.”⁵⁶

It was not just Norwegian friends of Grieg who contacted Greene after the publication of his memoir; in November 1982 Greene received a letter from Alison Augustin, the daughter of Dorothy Hawke. Hawke had met Grieg on a train from Verona to Köln in 1922

when they were both traveling through Europe with friends. A widowed socialite, she was fourteen years Grieg’s senior, and the young Norwegian was immediately smitten with her. After Hawke departed Köln unexpectedly, the twenty-year-old Grieg frantically searched the city for her and afterward wrote her a long, adoring letter in unidiomatic English: “What do you think about me, if you think? Yesterday I took a very quick and rude farewell, and disappeared forever. ... I was really so fascinated over meeting you, that I should be very sorrow if you only should be ships that pass in the night.”⁵⁷ Evidently Hawke did not view the young writer as rude, and they began a correspondence and subsequent romance that would last, on and off, until Grieg met his future wife Gerd in 1935. During his time at Oxford University, Grieg and Hawke would often holiday together, and she even typed up his thesis on Kipling, kindly polishing his slowly improving English. When he later published his play *A Young Man’s Love* in 1927, it was dedicated to Hawke. She owned copies of all Grieg’s Norwegian books, each with a personal handwritten dedication, and it was she who introduced him to the poets that he would later write about in *The Young Dead*, the book he was working on when he first met Greene.

In her letter to Greene, Augustin wrote of how “charmed” she was by Greene’s descriptions of Grieg and detailed the Norwegian writer’s relationship with her mother: “While

⁵⁴ Jønsson, Bjørg. ‘Vår mann i Antibes,’ *Aftenposten*, 17 Apr. 1982, 17.

⁵⁵ Jens Folkman, Letter to Graham Greene, 27 April 1982, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

⁵⁶ Graham Greene, Letter to Jens Folkman, 10 May 1982, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

⁵⁷ Grieg, Nordahl. Letter to Dorothy Hawke, 1 Sept. 1922. Brevs. 365b, National Library of Norway, Oslo, Norway.

their close friendship lasted probably some three years—perhaps 1924 to 1927—she continued to adore him and clearly considered him the most exciting man she had known. ... She too was shattered at the news of his death.”⁵⁸ She described how Grieg always asked her mother to join him during his time in Russia, much like he had done with Greene, and Augustin’s words of how it was one of her mother’s “greatest regrets that she did not do so” certainly echoed Greene’s lament in *Ways of Escape* of how he wished he had “begged, borrowed or stolen” the money needed to visit his Norwegian friend.

Epilogue

When Greene died in 1991, he had for many years been considered one of England’s finest writers. Meanwhile, Grieg’s impassioned writing seemed strangely out of place in peacetime, and his work soon disappeared off the literary map, only to reemerge in the aftermath of the terror attacks in Norway on 22 July 2011. And yet when Greene first encountered Grieg in 1932, it was the young Norwegian who was the more experienced writer of the two, with several successful publications under his belt.

What was it that drew them to each other? Perhaps Grieg’s insistent letters imploring Greene to come with him to Lapland, to Tallinn, to Moscow, to his ski-hut on the outskirts of Oslo, provided the English writer with the escapism he so often sought. Perhaps they recognized in each other their own fascination with danger, which led Greene into war zones and Grieg to his death. Perhaps the two men, who met at

a difficult juncture in both their lives, simply got along well. In *Ways of Escape* Greene elaborates further on the nature of their friendship:

Each of our meetings was separated by a space of years from the next, yet I would not have hesitated to claim friendship with him—even a degree of intimacy. I was unable to read his books—for only one had been translated into English (in any case his poetry would have been untranslatable)—and so he struck me less as a fellow author with whom I must talk shop than as a friend I had grown up with, to whom I could speak and with whom I could argue about anything in the world.⁵⁹

Greene was unable to read Grieg’s work, and so their friendship was not based on literary merit but on their many conversations, by letter and in person, in the brief decade they knew each other. Greene later wrote: “There were always arguments where Nordahl was and never a trace of anger.” Grieg was the only man Greene had ever met “with whom it was possible to disagree profoundly both on religion and politics and yet feel all the time the sense of goodwill and an open mind.”⁶⁰

Grieg’s “goodwill” and “charity” that Greene described as being “of greater value than the gold of the National Bank,” seemed always to have an encouraging effect on the English writer and might help explain why the troubled Catholic and the Stalinist heathen kept in touch for so long and always tried to meet up in some corner of the world.⁶¹ Greene’s writing certainly makes it clear that he, long after Grieg was gone, could still remember the feeling of intimacy

⁵⁸ Alison Augustin, Letter to Graham Greene, 18 November 1982, MS1995-3, Box 70, Folder 43, Graham Greene Papers, John J. Burns Library, Boston College, Boston, USA.

⁵⁹ Greene, *Ways of Escape*, 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁶¹ Ibid., 25-26.

that the Norwegian writer had inspired and which Greene described as being as impersonal “as sunlight.”⁶²

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⁶² Ibid., 21.